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Dialectics of Abstract and Concrete in Marx's Capital

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Chapter 2:

Hegel's Conception of the Concrete



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As we know Hegel was the first to understand the development of knowledge as a historical process subject to laws that do not depend on men's will and consciousness. He discovered the law of ascent from the abstract to the concrete as the law governing the entire course of development of knowledge.

This law is, first of all, shown to be a simple empirically stated fact – the fact of progressive development of the spiritual culture of mankind. Indubitably, man's spiritual culture, his spiritual world, are gradually becoming increasingly rich, complicated, varied, and in this sense, more concrete. Despite all its complexity, however, man's spiritual world remains an integral world governed by the same laws thus constituting a genuine unity in diversity.

Movement from the abstract to the concrete appears in Hegel first and foremost as the empirically indubitable natural form in which the construction of the 'kingdom of the spirit' is completed. At first this kingdom (the sphere of human culture) is naturally uncomplicated, poor in established forms, that is, extremely abstract, becoming in the course of time increasingly more complex, rich, and varied, that is, more concrete.

It is easy to see that there is as yet nothing dialectical or idealist in all this.

Idealism, and at the same time specifically Hegel's dialectics, begin later, when Hegel tackles the question of the motive forces of the development of the 'kingdom of the spirit', the sphere of consciousness. The specific feature of Hegelian philosophy is the fact that the idea of development is fully applied only to the phenomena of consciousness.

In his view, nature existing outside and independently from the spirit does not develop. It confronts consciousness as a picture frozen in time, identical from the very beginning and for all time to come. Consciousness realises its restless active nature through actively considering this motionless picture, this realm of things eternally standing in the same relations to one another. The activity of realisation as such also contains within itself the mainspring of its own development.

The spirit is the only concreteness, that is, the only developed and developing system of living interacting phenomena passing one into another. This latter trait is, in his view, entirely uncharacteristic of nature. For him, nature is abstract through and through, metaphysical in its very essence: all of nature's phenomena are *side by side* with one another, *isolated* from one another, lying outside one another. As Hegel puts it, nature falls within itself into its abstract moments, into separate things, objects, processes, existing side by side with one another and independently from one another. At best, genuine dialectics is only vaguely reflected or dimly looms in nature.

The idealist nature of Hegel's philosophy is here revealed in a very striking manner: he directly attributes the metaphysical limitations of contemporary natural science, the *knowledge of nature, to nature itself* as its eternal property.

Where contemporary natural science timidly began to realise the dialectics of the things themselves, he also sees 'rudiments' of real concreteness, of the living dialectical interaction of phenomena. Thus he sees an imperfect form of concreteness in organic life. Here he discovers living interaction linking up all parts of the animal organism in a unified system within which each separate member exists and has a meaning only through its interaction with others: outside this interaction it cannot in general exist. An amputated hand decomposes, ceases to be a hand even in external form and ultimately in name, too. It cannot exist separately in abstraction.

Here Hegel sees a weak resemblance of the concreteness which he regards as the exceptional property of the spiritual world. In the world of chemistry, in his view, internal interaction is even weaker, although there are rudiments of it here as well. Here oxygen, for instance, can and does exist side by side with hydrogen, even if they are not bound as elements of water. This relation is impossible in the organism: the hand cannot exist separately from the head, both hand and head exist only through their interconnection, only within this mutual connection and conditioning. A particle possessing only mechanical properties remains the same particle, which does not change in itself depending on the kind of mechanical bond with other particles of the same kind. Isolated or extracted from this bond, that is, in its abstracted form, it will still remain the same, it will not go bad or decay as the hand 'abstracted' from the body.

The Hegelian system of nature is built as a system of stages beginning with the abstract sphere of mechanism and ending with the relatively concrete sphere of organic life. The whole pyramid is crowned by the spirit, as the sphere whose entire meaning lies in *concreteness*, in the absolute interconnectedness of all its phenomena.

Wherein lies the falsity of this Hegelian construction?

First of all in his taking the historically limited conceptions of contemporary natural science, which did not, indeed, contain conscious dialectics, to be the absolute characteristics of nature itself.

As for the fact that nature as a whole is an actually developing integral system of forms of motion of matter mutually conditioning one another, that nature as a whole, including man, is the real, *objective concreteness*, this fact is mystified by Hegel in his system, in which the abstract, that is, the mechanism, is the manifestation of *spiritual* concreteness.

He credits no form of motion, apart from the motion of thinking reason, the sphere of concepts, with an immanent concreteness, that is, with real mutual conditioning of phenomena within a natural whole.

In the same way Hegel considers the sphere of the economic life of society. For him, that is the sphere of 'want and intellect', a sphere where single individuals isolated one from another interact, each of them connected with others only because he has to preserve himself as a single abstract individual, as a kind of social atom.

It is easy to see here as well that Hegel took the metaphysical limitations of contemporary political economy (he had a fair knowledge of the English theoreticians) for a metaphysical, abstractly intellectual character of the *economic sphere itself*. The sphere of economic life, the sphere of civic society, is supremely governed by *intellect*, that is, in Hegelian terms, the abstractedly one-sided form of consciousness.

In this sphere, opposites remain unmediated, unreconciled, they clash with one another, repulse one another, remaining the same metaphysical opposites. Real development is therefore impossible here. One and the same relation, the eternal relation of need to means of gratifying it, is eternally reproduced here.

Therefore the only possible form of transition to some higher stage in which all abstract extremes of the economic sphere are resolved is the transition to *legal* reality. Law emerges as the highest concreteness which *is manifested* as broken down into its abstract elements in the sphere of economic life.

Here we see that Hegel's logic, his dialectical yet at the same time essentially idealist conception of the concrete and the abstract serves to justify that which exists. In natural science, Hegel's conception perpetuates the given level of

knowledge of nature, and in sociology it supports the apologetic attitude both to the economic form of property and to the law that sanctions this property.

Hegel's attitude to political economy should be considered in greater detail. It is instructive in two respects: on the one hand, it is here, in the conception of concreteness, that the opposition between Hegel's idealist dialectics and Marx's materialist dialectics is seen most clearly, and on the other hand, it is seen just as clearly that idealist dialectics fully excuses the metaphysical nature of the thinking of the classics of bourgeois economy (Smith, Ricardo, and others) by negating the genuinely dialectical nature of the subject-matter of political economy itself, declaring it to be a sphere in which abstract intellectual definitions fully correspond to the character of the subject matter.

In other words, the idealism of Hegelian dialectics yields the same result which in Smith, Ricardo and Say is consequence of the *metaphysical* mode of inquiry.

What is the most striking feature of his approach? The fact that the sphere of economic life for him is not a concrete sphere, it is not a system of interaction of men and things which has developed historically and can be understood as a really concrete sphere.

For Hegel, economy is only one of the many manifestations of the 'concrete spirit', that is, an abstract manifestation of some higher nature of man. This higher nature, also manifested one-sidedly in the form of economic activity, is nothing but *the goal-directedly acting will* – the substance of law and economic life, politics and all the rest. The goal-directed (reasonable) will appears as a concrete substance which is manifested abstractly and one-sidedly in its products, in its modi – economy, law, politics, etc. As long as this is taken for a starting point, as long as goal-directed reasonable will (or simply reason, since will in Hegel is a form of the existence of reason in man) is presented as a universal concrete substance of all forms of social activity, he naturally regards economy only as something that may be interpreted as a *manifestation* of reasonable will, as one of its many revelations, as a one-sided (abstract) manifestation of reason and will of the social individual.

Therefore all definitions of economy, all categories of economic life (value, profit, wages, etc.) appear as *abstract modi of reasonable will*, as particular or specific forms of its social being. In economy, reason emerges in a form which does not correspond to its universal nature but merely to a *single* one-sided abstract manifestation of it. Concrete universal will creates the form that is adequate to its nature only in law and the state. The state is, according to Hegel, the concrete reality of the universal will comprising in itself all the particular, specific, and

therefore abstract forms of its manifestation, including economy, the sphere of needs, a 'system of needs'.

Within economy, the universal concrete substance of anything that is human – reasonable will – appears in an extremely one-sided and abstract form. The sphere of men's economic activity is not, therefore, a *concrete* system of interaction of men and things, emerging and developing *irrespective of the will and consciousness* of individuals. It cannot constitute the subject-matter of a special science and can only be considered in a system of universal definitions of reasonable will, i.e. within the philosophy of spirit, within the philosophy of state law. Here it appears as one of the specific spheres of the activity of reason, as an abstract form of revelation of reason acting in history.

It is not difficult to see the diametric opposition between the views of Marx and Hegel of economy, of the nature of its dialectical interconnection with all the other manifestations of social life, and of its role in the social whole.

On this point, Marx opposes Hegel as a *materialist first* and foremost. The most interesting feature here is, however, that it is *materialism* that enables him to develop a more profound view of the dialectics of the subject matter.

For Marx, the sphere of economic interaction of men is a fully *concrete* sphere of social life with its own specific immanent laws of motion. In other words, it appears to be relatively independent of all other forms of social activity of men and precisely for this reason constitutes the subject-matter of a special science. The system of economic interaction between men emerges as a historically arising and historically developed system, all aspects of which are mutually connected with one another through unity of origin (genetically).

It is important to stress that the system of economic relations is a system that is not only *relatively* but also *absolutely* independent of the will and consciousness of individuals, although the latter's will and consciousness do play a most active role in its formation. The very nature of this participation of conscious will in the formation of the system is determined by the system of economic relations itself incorporating men endowed with will and consciousness, rather than by the 'nature of the spirit', beforehand and from the outside. In other words, will and reason themselves appear here as modi of some other substance, as its abstract manifestations and products. All definitions of the will and consciousness of individuals involved in the development of the economic system are literally *deduced* from the nature of internal self-movement of the system as a whole, interpreted as *products* of the movement of this system.

Thus, from this point of view everything looks exactly the reverse as compared to the Hegelian construction: everything is right side up. It is materialism that acts as the principal cause and condition of the fact that dialectics is applied to the understanding of economy in a full measure and much more comprehensively than it is generally possible to do from the Hegelian positions.

For Hegel, the category of concreteness is fully applicable only then and there, when and where we deal with conscious will and its products, only in the sphere of the spirit and its products, its manifestations (*Entäusserungen*).

In Marx's view, this most important category of is fully applicable *everywhere, in any sphere of natural and social being*, independently of any spirit whatsoever, and on this basis, to the phenomena of life of the spirit itself, that is, to the development of any sphere of social consciousness, including reasoning, the sphere of logic.

According to the Hegelian construction and its idealist starting point, no form of movement in nature can be understood as a *concrete* form, as a historically emerging self-developing system of internally interacting phenomena. Any such sphere acquires some relation to concreteness only when it is involved in the spiritual process, when one succeeds in interpreting it as a product of the spirit, a modus of the spiritual substance. The attribute of concreteness proves to be an exclusive monopoly of the self-developing spirit, while nature in itself (including the material aspect of the human social being) has no concreteness at all in its existence. In the eyes of Hegel, interconnection is in general possible only as ideal interconnection, as posited by the spirit or concept.

The category of concreteness, one of the central categories of dialectics, is therefore emasculated in Hegel's system to such an extent that it is impossible to apply it to natural science or the materialist conception of society. In short, the category of concreteness and consequently dialectics as a whole, which is inconceivable without this category, turns out to be inapplicable to anything but the sphere of the spirit. To everything else it is only applicable insofar as these other things are interpreted purely idealistically, as a manifestation of the universal spirit, as a one-sided (abstract) manifestation of the concrete spirit, of the concrete fullness and richness of the absolute spirit, the absolute idea.

These idealist limitations of Hegel's conception of concreteness, the narrowness of this conception, are indissolubly linked with the notion that nature is something static, that development belongs in the sphere of spirit only.

Concreteness indeed is indissolubly linked with development, and dialectical development at that, with self-development through contradictions. The latter Hegel saw in consciousness and nowhere else. Hence the narrowness of his conception of concreteness, a conception which, *narrow as it is*, is later extended to the entire field of nature.

Connected with this is Hegel's interpretation of the method of ascent from the abstract to the concrete. According to Hegel, that means that the entire reality, including nature and history, is the ascent of the spirit to itself, a process that goes through a number of stages from the 'mechanism', as the sphere of *purely abstract manifestation of spiritualness*, to the concrete human spirit. The ascent to itself is performed by the *absolute*, non-human, divine spirit. As such, this spirit is concrete in itself (*an sich*) even before it has revealed itself as 'mechanism', 'chemism', or 'organism' in a one-sided, abstracted manner.

That is why pure logic in Hegel's system precedes the philosophical consideration of nature, the latter being presented as a number of stages in which the concrete logical spirit *reveals itself* (*sich entäussert*) ever more fully and concretely in the form of space and time.

Ascent from the abstract to the concrete therefore coincides in Hegel with the generation of the world by the logical idea. Thus the law of spiritual *reproduction* of the world by thought is here directly represented as the law of *production* of this world by the creative power of the concept.

This Hegelian illusion, as Marx showed, is simply based on a one-sided view of the philosopher and logician of reality. Hegel, as logician *ex professo*, is interested everywhere and first of all in 'the matter of logic rather than in the logic of the matter'. From this viewpoint, man is considered only as the subject of logical theoretical activity, and the world, only as object, only as material processed in this activity. This abstraction is, within certain limits, justified in logic, and as long as logic bears these limitations in mind, there is nothing idealistic in this abstraction.

Hegel's approach, however, eliminates these boundaries. He considers thought not only and not simply as one of man's abilities but also as the substantial source of all the other human abilities and kinds of activity, as their essential foundation. He treats the ability to change practically the external world, nature outside man, also as a manifestation of the mental principle in man. The actual process of practical transformation of the world appears in his philosophy as a consequence and manifestation of purely spiritual activity – in the final analysis, of purely logical activity, while the whole of mankind's material culture, as a product of thought, as a 'reified concept', as the 'other-being of the concept'.

In reality, the immediate basis of the development of thought is not nature as such but precisely the transformation of nature by social man, that is, practice. If this objective practical basis of thought is presented as the product of thought, as thought in its material realisation, one has to conclude that thinking has to do with objectivity only in appearance, while in actual fact, essentially, it deals only with itself, with its own 'other-being'. Logical definitions, that is, those definitions which the external objective world owes to thought, appear as the absolute and only genuine definitions of this world.

The point of view of logic becomes in Hegel absolute and all-embracing. If man's essence is believed to be in thought, and the essence of objective reality, in being a product of thought, an 'alienated concept', the law of development of thought appears as the law of development of the real world. That is why man and thinking in concepts prove to be complete synonyms in Hegel, just as the world and the world in concepts, the logically assimilated world. The law which in actual fact determines only the activity of the theoretically thinking head, is made the supreme law of the development and practice of man and of the objective world.

The actual subject-matter of Hegelian logic remains, despite his illusions, only the process of theoretical assimilation of the world, of mental reproduction of the world. Insofar as Hegel studies this world, he arrives at actual discoveries. Insofar as he takes this subject-matter for something different from what it actually is, for something greater – the formation of the world itself, he takes the path of erroneous comprehension of the world and of thought, too. He deprives himself of any possibility of understanding the process of thinking itself. As long as the actual conditions producing logical activity are presented as its own products and consequences the logical reasoning is suspended in mid air, or rather in the 'ether of pure thought'. The fact itself of the origin of thought and the laws of its development become quite inexplicable. It has no foundation in anything lying outside it. The foundation is believed to lie in itself. That is why Hegel is compelled in the end to interpret the logical ability, the ability to distinguish between and combine concepts, as a kind of divine gift, as activity of the self-developing concept. The law of ascent from the abstract to the concrete, discovered by Hegel in the movement of theoretical cognition also remains inexplicable. The question as to why thought moves in one way rather than another, is answered by Hegelian philosophy in an essentially tautological way: such is the original and 'non-creatable' nature of thought. Tautology ceases to be a mere tautology here, becoming an idealist lie.

That is the point at which Marx levels his critique, showing that there is no explanation at all here, and the attempt to pass an absence of an explanation for an explanation is tantamount to idealism.

Although Marx discards the Hegelian conception of thought as the demiurge of the objective world, he does not, however, reject the law which Hegel established in the movement of theoretical knowledge although he gave it a false idealistic interpretation. The ascent from the abstract to the concrete, as Marx points out, is in actual fact nothing but a method for human thought to assimilate the concrete reality existing outside of and independently from it. As such, this method assumes, first, the existence of uninterpreted concreteness, second, the practical objective of the social man developing independently from and third, an immediate sensual form of reflection of objective concreteness in consciousness, that is, empirical consciousness, contemplation and notion formed quite independently from and prior to special theoretical activity. In other words, theoretical thought is posterior to the existence of the objective world and, moreover, to another form of consciousness formed directly in the course of sensual practical activity – *the practical spiritual mode of assimilation of the world*, as Marx referred to it.

Hegel presents all these premises of theoretical thought as its products and consequences. Marx puts all things in their proper places.

From the materialist viewpoint, as Marx showed, the method of ascent from the abstract to the concrete may and must be understood quite rationally, without any mysticism, as the only method by which thought can reproduce in the concept, in the movement of concepts the historically established concreteness existing outside of and independently from it, a world existing and developing outside of and independently from thought.

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